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CHILDHOOD

ALICE MEYNELL

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FELLOWSHIP BOOKS

Edited by Mary Stratton

CHILDHOOD

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By

(Mrs) Alice Meynell

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Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' darling of a pigmy size,
Fretted with sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes."

I. TOYS

EVEN when we are about buying for a child the pretty toy, one thing we always say—"And yet children love their ugly old toys best." It is not true, however, that children love ugly toys; they like homely toys, toys that can be clasped very close; and though homely does mean ugly, in the American and the obsolete English languages (because we would hurt a word rather than our ugly fellow-creatures' feelings), yet what children like in homeliness is precisely homeliness, something not too bright or good. Ugliness is dreadful to a child, especially at first sight. He may learn

to love it in a dear parent or dear nurse, as the little boy evidently loves the bottle-nosed man in Ghirlandajo's delightful picture, but ugliness in a stranger is, in the strict sense, frightful. We are imposing our own sense of humour on children (as usual), and in its most ignoble form, when we give them grotesque toys. And as for guys, whereby we invert the natural veneration of images, the Fifth of November is a date which—for the sake of Sylvia—we all dread.

When Sylvia was three, she wept and shuddered great part of a day, and some part of a night, because a guy had suddenly faced her on the pavement. Now she is four she cons the difficult task of assuring herself "They are boys, they are only little boys." You may watch through her delicate face the horrible misgiving, the resolute reply, succeeding each other in that innocent, faltering breast. She says little of her fear, but gently leads the talk that way ; and, when she is told that the boy-guys have each received

a penny, her dear effort is to establish a human relation with them in her thoughts. "Pennies for them to buy nice sweets," she says to herself. There is the thing in common with her own beauty and tenderness and her little appetites: sweets, then boys—not devils. ☙ But if we wrong our children by the grotesque we do so more commonly by the gift of the worthless toy, a thing that will not last. The doll is perhaps as significant as the statue, the gargoyle, the coin; it is generally worse than even the statue. The manufactured image of mankind given to our little girls to play with is not only ill-designed, but so fragile as to cause more weeping than joy. The doll of commerce is very heartlessly made so that she often goes to pieces on the very day of presentation. Her brief arm comes off first; it had been ineffectually glued on. Piecemeal she comes apart. She does not preserve such poor individuality as she had, long enough to get a name. She is never named, never

grows old, never gets the love of habit, never ratifies the rapture of possession, never justifies the first kiss. A little time—at the best it is not long—is all that we of larger than dolls' growth have for that ratification and for that proof. Well, it is hardly moral that the child and the doll should kiss but for an hour.

Why, the personality of an honest doll ought to outlast her head—nay, several (resembling) heads. It was so with the dolls of an elder day and a simpler country. When one head was unfortunately walked upon, the old cook took the trunk and the pieces into the town, and matched the type of beauty —he was very grave and intent, without condescension, over the business. The face was renewed, but the name and the affection held on with a persistence that was almost worthy of party politics.

There have been charming toys in literature, but none much dearer to the reader of good will than the little horse which Esther Summerson gave to Peepy after one of his mis-

fortunes—Esther, contemned by the readers who think to crush Dickens by one word, "Sentimentality" (albeit this is an emotion that would be good for the majority, and the majority includes those critics), and by another word, "Caricature" (caricature being nevertheless a most admirable art). Dickens, of all the greater masters of our national Letters, has the most perfect memory of childhood. Not by his strangely over-praised "little Nell" is this proved, nor by any but certain brief passages of Paul Dombey, but in his much less famous children, and in the little fists of these are toys.

II. THE STRANGER'S CHILDREN

℣ "*Do you bite your thumb at us, Sir?*" "*I do bite my thumb, Sir.*" "*Do you bite your thumb at us, Sir?*" "*No, Sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, Sir; but I bite my thumb, Sir.*"

℣ ACROSS the "backy-garden," at the rear of the house where the Children dwelt —the child of tumult, his luminous little

dark sister, and the somewhat older ones—and over the young poplars from George Meredith's garden, ran a small street with shops and lodgings. It was very full of children, and sometimes they leant so far out of the upper windows that the question arose in the Children's home, Would a neighbourly present of nursery window-bars be received with little or with much contempt, or perhaps declined, and if so with offended feelings or without? The Children themselves did not encourage the project. The children at the back were very proud, they said. And how did they show the passion? it was asked. "Well, mother, they come to the window, and black their boots at us."

Of all the many surprises of childish replies, this was not the least. It was given in great gravity and good faith. To these young observers the action of their opposite neighbours admitted no other interpretation, albeit there had been no exchange of covert verbal defiances, such as, "Do you black your

boots at us?" "We do black our boots." "Do you black your boots at us?" "We do not black our boots at you; but we black our boots." The demonstration was not of battle, as "I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list"—but of sole, sufficient pride, silent, detached, lifted between heaven and earth, at the second-floor windows of its appropriate street. It was not for a mere grown-up person to introduce doubts, or to suggest how far from the usual manifestations of pride, how different from its customary pomps, is the symbolism of blacking and of boots. No doubt the children were right, and declined our symbolism on their own good authority.

Their conclusion as to the boots had probably its own obscure justification, and was not due to unworthy suspiciousness, for the Children were disposed to friendliness, and would have inclined rather to a lenient than to a severe interpretation of the act of demonstrative blacking, had there been room

for

for doubt. At a taller and quite remote row of windows appeared the heads of other children, of whom Pride seemed to have made no victims. At least there appeared among them no signs of blacking. With these the more usually intelligible language of toys was the means of communication. At long range—so long that a walking duck could hardly be distinguished from a mechanical alligator, and dolls looked as much alike as the heroines of a year's novels—toy was held up for sympathetic and companionable rivalry with toy ; and across intervening roofs, by means that yet remain a mystery, the pet names of both batches of children had been announced and exchanged. Never was so enterprising and prosperous a friendship on facilities so slender. The delays, hesitations, and reserves of acquaintances begun in the ordinary ways, in houses, in Kensington Gardens, or otherwise on point-blank terms, never troubled these mutual advances. Or so it seemed. But with some surprise the mother of the

Children, walking with them, perceived that they cast looks askance, neither wholly strange nor in any wise intimate, at another walking group, equally lowering, gloomy with an equal kind of unavowed intelligence, and with an equally embarrassed mother. The children of Pride, walking in the street perhaps with those very boots new-blacked, could hardly have been watched with more sombre or more cloudy eyes. Afraid lest her young ones should have committed the *grossièreté* of making enemies, the mother of the Children asked them, in their unwonted silence, who it was that they seemed to be cutting. With surprise she then heard that these strangers, seen at full length, were they whose distant eager heads were invested with so much childish friendship in the windows under the skies. Within an hour or so after that unfriendly encounter, with its shadowy strangeness and vigilance of eyes, all was restored at the high back-windows, and a London sunset showed the ambiguous toys

—new ones, just bought in the course of that walk estranged—the signalling hands, and the jostling heads unequal of height, at their former intercourse, candid, clear, familiar, and full of spirit and drama.

Distance seemed to set these gallant little creatures free from some of the disadvantages of the world and from the uneasiness of crowds. They were released in a world barely sprinkled with people within hail of one another, glad of recognition, and made friends by intervening space, and liberty partaken.

Perhaps it was the childish solitude that made the window-communication so clear. Almost painful to the writer is still the memory of introductions in childhood. Ah, to be placed in front of three little natives in white embroidery, and bidden to talk with them in Genoese, or in any human tongue, with parents artificially listening in compliment to the stranger's children, but solicitous for their own! There are moments that

are literally difficult to live through, and this was of them. Solitude and a garden hedge between, or some such other slight defence and distance, and Genoese no doubt would have flowed.

☙ Nor can one easily forget the unexpressed misgivings at those invitations to play with the stranger's children in the gardens of the Tuileries. It was already depressing enough to stand on a counter to be fitted, and to hear the *modiste* tell one's mother that one ought to have the *petit jupon bouffant* which one had not, and that no coat could have justice without it. But to be accosted, under this visible disability, by the children of Paris, little girls obviously furnished with the *petit jupon bouffant*—this was the cause of a dumb shyness. "*Veux-tu venir jouer avec moi?*" So ran the invariable invitation of the charming Parisians, little citizens so well civilized as to need no defences, no barriers, no return to the space and the distances of birds in search of primitive confidence, or

to the rarity of angels in quest of natural courage. The English child kept in the after years of life the sense of national defeat that attended the consent to that unequal game. If Waterloo was won upon the playing-fields of Eton, it has been many times avenged on the playing-grounds of the gardens of the Tuileries.

Otherwise, and the conditions being more free and more nearly equal, to play with strangers, to play internationally, was a great delight. The game, being all dramatic, did away with any need for close knowledge of the actor. Since yonder boy was a spirited horse of uncertain temper, his temper as a boy was of small importance. There was no need even for names when all the players alike were terra-cotta pipkins for sale, to be known as sound or cracked by their voices under a blow. Quarrels never arose in these encounters of an hour. Our playfellows were toys of the liveliest animation, but without so much perceptible character as might

chance to ruffle our own. The concert of Europe was undisturbed.

One only remembrance is fraught with some self-reproach. It is that of two little English girls, who chose to frighten all the children of an Italian village and sweep the hill of them. It was done without malice, but with a horrid sense of dominance; and without violence except that of mere running. The population—sad to remember—was so gentle that its full number of children, of several ages, were thus to be hunted down the slopes of the chestnut-woods, by the onset of a couple of capricious foreign girls. But so it was. The day was a *festa*, and the children, carrying their shoes, strolled on the hill-side, between the cypresses and the belfries. All things go in unequal groups on such an afternoon—little companies of church-bell tunes, young men playing at bowls, no one alone. The village children loitered principally about the steep avenues to the church. But when the two slender

invaders began to give chase, the first group scattered, and then the next, perhaps not knowing how little formidable were the hunters; then a third broke, a fourth wheeled. Young Italians do not run without clamour, and the outcry of the dismay of all those children seemed the wilder that the two pursuers kept their breath for the hunting. One swept the wood, another charged down the narrow road. They joined, they closed upon the quarry, or in open order cut off the escape of scattered fugitives. Of the little villagers there was not found one to resist, or so much as to question the attack. They cried out to each other, pointing the probable way to safety as they ran. That they must run was the one thing they were sure of, and they sped over rough and smooth, heads down, so that the heights were presently clear of them, and their last clamours dropped as they reached the shelter of the street, like the cries of birds that wheel and settle after an alarm. The two representatives of the

predominant race, who cannot have measured nine feet between them, sat down in the conquered district, flushed with success. Alas!

III. CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF THE PAST

Yesterday Rebecca Mason,
In the parlour by herself,
Broke the handsome china basin
Placed upon the mantel-shelf.

BY a kind of dreadful punctuality of rhythm and rhyme, by the forethought of the surname of Rebecca, by the unadorned austerity of the anecdote, the reader is fairly subdued. Here is the "inevitable" word of which, in recent literary criticism, we heard so much. That stanza is written for our overthrow and confusion. It is as though a sheep had butted us, and done it efficiently. A mother of to-day tested on her modern children the verses—"Cautionary Verses" is the appropriate name of some of them—written by the Misses Taylor (Jane and Anne) and by

Mrs. Turner, the creator of Rebecca Mason, for the children of the earlier part of the nineteenth century. The little hearers were not much more than bored. It was prose work of about the same period, and animated by the same spirit, that had the full success of irony. Mrs. Turner had as it were fixed us with her eye and challenged us to think Rebecca Mason's name to be artificially prepared; she brought her stanza to a close which left the reader speechless. But Mrs. Fenwick must really "abide our question." Mrs. Fenwick wrote a book about a Bad Family and a Good. She asks us to believe that these families lived in the same town, in the same street, in "handsome houses" of equal size, and that they teemed with an equal brood of six children—three good girls and three good boys, and three bad girls and three bad boys. There is a kind of heroic symmetry here which is ill-suited to the quality of Mrs. Fenwick's prose. Now, young children love to hear of large families,

and to get their names and ages precisely right. But these two equal batches of six caused something like dismay; and when their names were disclosed the spirit of derision sprang forth, and was not quenched again.

It is not wise to tempt too much that spirit of derision in children. Burlesque and irony do not accord with the simplicity which becomes them. But there is derision and derision. In this case it was fresh, it was cordial, it was purely humorous, and as joyous as the laugh of running races. The Bad Family's names—alliterative—gave the signal for the first laugh: Greedy George and Selfish Sarah; but Manly Edward and Well-bred Charles in the Good Family were hailed with candid delight. You might envy Manly Edward his reception, the generous laughter of a little girl of eight suddenly confronted with his masculine perfections; Well-bred Charles never had in his own day of a hundred years ago, from any literal

reader,

reader, the welcome he had from the honest irony of this child. Is scorn really joyous in the heart of man or woman? It was as joyous as ever Tennyson imagined it in the humorous heart of this childish listener: innocent scorn, liberal scorn, intelligent scorn, simple exhilaration of contempt. For really Studious Arthur, Patient Emma, Generous Susan and the rest deserved to be thus rejected with the most cheerful incredulity; they were intolerable.

℟ But perhaps scorn and contempt are not the just words. What the child expresses in her loyal laughter is derision without its sneer; a sally of cheerful astonishment at the book, at the children who took it seriously, at the authoress who administered it. It is in fact neither more nor less than good laughter at bad art. The child does not deride the virtues at all; the manliness of Edward and the good manners of Charles—so far as those qualities accorded with human life—would command her respect in any

contemporary child. Happily so, for the sense of humour is by no means the most important sense in a young child ; credulity is better, admiration is much better, and simplicity is still much better. The sense of humour would be dearly gained at the expense of these. But there is no such expense. The habit of burlesque and irony in childhood is deplorable and unchildlike. But purely childlike and purely natural is the humour that rejects Mrs. Fenwick's families. She has what she merits, and even if the quality of the hilarity she causes now were questionable, the fault lies with her. She might have raised a better kind of laugh while she was yet at her authorship, and she did not.

And if she refreshed no one with humour in her own day, did she fill her young readers with any good aspirations ? She was really too dull to have any real appreciation of the manliness of Edward or of the industry of Arthur. And see how she rewards and how she avenges. To the Good Family she awards

the approval of the street in which the two handsome houses were situated. The Bad Family she punishes with the ill opinion of the same neighbourhood. Mrs. Fenwick, and Mrs. Turner, and the Misses Taylor were very small writers in their day, but they share with two great—most diversely great—writers one certain character. They have as little spirituality as Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. And children are not without a sense of that defect when right things and wrong things, and their consequences, are the matter of a story.

IV. CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF THE PRESENT

THE idea that dragons are not interesting characters in a romance for grown-up people is a modern idea. It is not a good idea, for an interest in dragons is quite as easy, and at least as pleasing, as a belief in some of the characters in contemporary fiction. That adult readers of the older

romance were on easy and equal terms with dragons is clear from the fact that those romances were written not for children, but for their elders. Even the classic and undying fairy stories—before Hans Christian Andersen—were written neither about children nor for them. They have been rather left to children than given to them. The grown-up dropped them, content that the children should believe (that is, rightly, pretend to believe) in dragons, though we ourselves prefer to pretend to believe in the detestable people of the annual plays. Therefore we shed our ancient love-stories and the children pick them up, with all their wizards, witches, transformations, and delights, and thrive on them. One of the causes of their good fortune is that they were composed without condescension.

But the condescension of the new story-book is an offence. Some of our annual authors evidently think that the more nonsense they write for the little ones the better,

and

and the more "fancy" the author displays the more flexible will he seem to be in his performance. What, we may wonder, if we cannot remember, does the young child think of the flexibility of the grown-up who perform? I think he knows all about that grimace and the value of it. Mrs. Fenwick, Mrs. Turner, and the Misses Taylor were at any rate not humorists. It they stimulate the sense of comedy in the child of our times, they must have quelled it in the child of their own. Whereas, of some of our later writers, in whose eyes Mrs. Fenwick and her like are doubtless nothing but ridiculous, it is to be feared that they have done worse than quell the sense of comedy in children; that they have rather made it weak with the tension of their use; they have "practised upon it," as used to be said of unlawful arts. They have worn it out by too persistent appeal. I would rather have trusted to the recovery of a child's comic spirit after the negative operation of

a Mrs. Fenwick—even in the days when she was taken seriously—than I would hope for a healthy condition after a course of reading among the newer Christmas story-books of a comic character. All is not for self-congratulation as time brings its revenges.

I find, in nearly all the little books of the day, the repeated and repeated stimulation of the spirit of fun in its thinnest shape; and sometimes there is to be perceived the author's courageous hope that the child will think better of the fun than he himself has succeeded in thinking, when all is done; now and then the flagging heart is easily to be detected, and the misgiving that the wary little reader may find no more laughter in the matter than moved the writer at his work of humorous invention.

No such anxieties beset our Mrs. Fenwick. Her readers had to know their place. She kept the upper hand, serenely. She had no waverings, not she. But then she was doing straightforward work; she had no

occasion for secret thoughts, and she knew none. She made no appeal to the chances of a child's spirit; she curried not his favour; the child had to take what was given him. But at the end of the account perhaps he was no more ill served. If the elastic childish sense of humour should fail in its spring and buoyancy by reason of so much straining by the child's authors, if it should grow lax and flaccid, there would be much loss rather than gain by the work of a century.

Indeed the reaction against the "Cautionary Stories" of 1813 has carried the modern author far; and it is a helpless and a weak thing to be carried by reactions. In all the children's books of a season you shall hardly find one "moral" at the close. Now children with erect minds like a moral. And the worst thing in all these happenings would be—perhaps already is—this: that a child of to-day would be afraid and ashamed to own that he likes a moral; would be so aware of the light mind in his father

and mother and his aunts—yes, in his godfather and godmother—so shy of their banter, so well-informed as to their habitual irony, so educated in paltriness and burlesque, that he would not confess that he likes a story with good people and bad in it, a story with free-will in it, and duty. What a misfortune! A little honest creature covertly compelled to deny the little simple lord of his breast!

Too much common sense—and too common—was the fault of a hundred years ago. And now the fault is too much common nonsense—and far too common. Since we began to find children funny we seem unable to think them funny enough. Miss Austen did not think them funny at all. See the conscious Anne Elliot when an ungovernable nephew had her by the neck and Captain Wentworth disengaged her. Other children in her novels are as intolerable as those in Thackeray's. The children in Charlotte Brontë's novels are objects of her sombre

dislike;

dislike ; of anything except natural comedy. But even in our altered times, children are not necessarily farcical to themselves. They would not always be clowning.

Rossetti was harassed by the word "quaint" with which he was dogged. If modern children had a sense of that word and of what it implies, and were fully conscious of their own dignity, they too would find it harassing.

But between the old ways and the new came Robert Louis Stevenson, some of whose delightful verses have the sententiousness or Jane and Anne Taylor and Mrs. Fenwick, with the important addition of genius ; sententiousness with an equal smile. He does not clown, he makes no grimace, but looks steadily and intelligibly into the child's eyes.

V. FAIRIES

IT is for fear of the grown-up, or at least out of respect towards them, that a

chapter must be given to fairies. If the children do not care very much for fairies, they must be made to care. "Who is to care if they do not? Who is to be properly child-like if they are not?" It was, accordingly, an illustrious grown-up who wrote (I am quoting Francis Thompson) "Know you what it is to be a child?" Well, we all should know, and we are generally anxious to teach one another. The poet answers for us most eloquently, "It is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses . . . for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul. . . ." And previously he had written, "It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism." Were elves really of any importance to him? We must take his word for it, even though we may make a slight reservation because we know that even a great poet has some regard to what is expected. But another great poet, who never paid any

attention to what is expected from him, has told us, out of his very own experience, not what childhood, but what one childhood, was. To Coventry Patmore it was a time rather of divination than of credulity. His "sweet childhood," he names it; but it was a time of secrets, of thoughts wholly unsuggested by story-books, unprompted by authors, parents, uncles, godmothers, or imaginative adult persons of any kind of officiousness. It is certain that he did not think elves to be whispering in his ear. But he contemplated a pebble in the gravel of a garden path and conceived the thought that but for unrelaxing pressure it would explode into dust. Another real child—but not a wonderful child like Coventry Patmore—walking on grassy garden paths, was a little troubled to think how many living creatures she might be crushing; and how short their lives were, anyway. But, she thought, as the size and space differed between very large beings (herself, for example) and very small,

so might time ; and a minute of her life might be a full year of successions of feelings and happenings to the ant. Six years old could not put her speculation into appropriate words (a task which might tax sixty years old), but the thought was very definite to her. One of the privileges of a child is that he is very near the earth ; he knows moss and the scudding creatures near it. When Oliver Wendell Holmes found the scent of a little box hedge to be suggestive of eternity, it was no doubt merely suggestive of time—the incalculable remote time of childhood, which stands very fairly for eternity—because he had smelt it when he was on the level of its fresh leaves. So Patmore, a little child on a garden path, found matter for close thought. Truth interested him, and fiction did not. In later years he gave himself to the truth of science, and finally to the truth of poetry. Truth was to him more splendid and more mysterious than any tale.

☙ It may well be doubted whether children are generally credulous. It may even be doubted whether Francis Thompson believed in his own elves and their whispers—whether he cared for possible coaches and horses as much as for real pumpkins and mice. It may be that those elves of his were, in his wonderful boyhood, nothing other than symbols, believed in with interpretation.

☙ For children do not believe in fairies a jot. I have just asked my youngest daughter whether she believed in them, and she said "Of course not—only I liked the stories." Fiction to children is fiction and not fact. They are artists enough for that. And it is strange indeed that many elders have so forgotten childhood as to imagine that they believed in fairies, if they honestly do imagine it. What dull years have so blurred their past that they are willing to rehearse the sham memories of others? A belief in fairies is no child's play. Children have nothing to do with it except as in some

countries they tremble behind their trembling fathers. It pleased Ruskin—and for once I marvel at his pleasure—to think of fairies believed to be so disorderly in the woods at the back of Joan of Arc's country that a church service was held in the forest depths once a year, and even then they were not quelled. I think this is the only false passage of Ruskin—I know no other. A belief in fairies is a terrible and an adult thing, a horrible heresy, and nothing for a tourist's smiles. It was the cause that a woman, in remoter Ireland, believed to be not herself but a changeling left in her likeness and in her place by fairies, was burnt by the father, husband, and sons who loved the "lost" one—not many years ago. This is not child's play; it is faith. We indeed are child's-playing with serious things and with serious words when we ask our children to say they believe in fairies. Not that our request will ever make them believe; they are honest people. But in this appeal we

tamper with the word "believe," and palter with its sense. The pretty game of calling on the children of the audience of "Peter Pan" to declare their faith in fairies seemed to me disastrous—a game of men and women at the expense of children, a cumbersome frolic at best and an artificial, a tyrannous use of the adult sense of sentimental humour against the helpless. I could with better conscience use my superior physical strength upon them than exploit them for love of my own condescension. (And yet Sir J. Barrie has written the most adorable "pretending" story ever written about a child.)

No, children love a fairy story not because they think it true, but because they think it untrue, and because it makes no fraudulent appeal to their excellent good sense. That sense they are delighted to put aside while they "pretend." That is their own word. Every child uses it, and every child knows what he means by it. "Let's pretend," not "Let's believe." Their mother

does not put "Let's pretend" into the child's mouth; she finds it there. Without it there is no play. But the pretending is always drama and never deception or self-deception. Nay, the more obvious the drama the better the child likes it, especially when he is quite young and simple. I have always found the favourite game of hide-and-seek to be that in which there is no mystery about the hiding-place. The child loves best to know the cupboard in which his mother is crouching; if he fairly sees her into it so much the better. Then does he pretend to seek her, pretend to find her; then does she pretend to amaze him with a rush; then does he pretend to be overcome with the surprise of it. This game never tires. Do not tell me that this splendid little actor is a "realist." Even if you come to more elaborate drama—his pirates' lair behind the sofa, his Indians in the shrubbery, if he deceived himself the whole play would immediately go out. You may indeed see a

nervous child deceived, and frightened, by a mechanical toy. The mechanical toy is a silly blunder of the grown-up. The child sees in it some ambiguous life, where life ought not to be, and cries. There is no more fun in this than in the Irish peasant's flames. In both cases there is no fair pretending, but faith perverted.

VI. THE INFLUENTIAL CHILD

LOVE is not a mystery in Japan. It would not have been a mystery in Europe if a child—Dante—had not been in love. For mystery, religious and passionate alike, has its source and sanction in the heart of childhood. In like manner the love of Nature —of the landscape and the heavens—was a spiritual mystery in the boyish hearts of Vaughan and Traherne (repeated in that of their son and brother Wordsworth, the boy whom the cataract haunted like a passion). By these boyhoods, remembered very seriously in after-life, European literature has been

converted to two mystical passions which, century by century, are its very life. Without those boyhoods these two loves might have been fervent, exalting, poignant, but not mysterious, not spiritual with the "golden purity," the ignorant spirituality of childhood.

It is said that our European manner of romantic love (strictly speaking romantic) is scandalous to the Japanese. They can have had no Dante. And, in spite of their pleasure in blossoms—their annual popular tryst with cherry and chrysanthemum—it is doubtful whether the love of Nature has ever taken an illustrious or mysterious form with these little people. Their landscape art is gay, observant, and arbitrary ; but it is—as far as an Occidental student can interpret it—not passionate. For landscape that proves a passion for Nature and for mystery—both the legacies of man's dead childhood—we must look to the great painters of two countries, France and England ; to Turner,

Wilson,

Wilson, Crome, and Corot, and thus especially to the country that produced the boyhoods of Vaughan, Traherne, and Wordsworth. Many a child of our race has received that early inspiration, and these men of early genius not only received and remembered but put it on such record as to make it thenceforward a part of our literature. It is accepted, it is orthodox, it is expected of our poets. And this orthodoxy, due to these great men, is due originally to these great boys.

But for them these wonders of childhood would have been forgotten, or put away as childish things, by sensitive spirits who had likewise experienced them. They would not, at any rate, have gained this high literary honour and this literary authority. As it is, we are not ashamed to remember what mid-summer early morning was to us at nine years old, because literature gives us authority. The light to our adult eyes is lovely still, but the magic of its quality is

gone, the memory remaining, or the memory of the memory, or perhaps no more than the grace of knowing that there was once a memory—

Not to forget that I forget.

❧ It is their own landscape, their own hour, that moves children not to words but to emotions. Great views, I think, give them a more ordinary and grown-up pleasure; they do not love formal gardens, even Italian formal gardens; and on this point certainly the child is not the father of the man. But hill-sides in wild flower, calm summer seas, and those aspects and phases of landscape to which Tennyson gave his perfect word in return for a perfect emotion—these are wonderful to children. When Tennyson is restored, after the indiscriminate honour and the indiscriminate disesteem that have befallen him, to his own place, it will be because his sense of landscape, his sense of light and of sun, is like a child's.

❧ As

℣ As to Dante's love, the presence of an adult sentiment in a boy's heart—one should rather say in his soul and in the topmost places of his soul—is a heavenly incident of human history and therefore may be subject to the worst parody. I find, for example, an exceeding vulgarity in the coquetting of boys and girls in certain kinds of American stories. It is not a corruption of things innocent to evil; but it is the corruption of an extreme and lofty wisdom, and that corruption, I think, is silly.

℣ Let us place next to Dante's sacred love for a child the love of a man not sacred but profane—a man in fiction, as the great genius of Emily Brontë conceived him. Heathcliff's tempestuous love for Catherine remains throughout the horrible story a child's fresh love, even though Heathcliff is worse than a man. And, albeit Catherine dies a woman, it is to her childish ghost that he cries out of that window on the heights before his own death; the ghost of

a child, and she has been long a dead woman, and he is old.

VII. FISHER CHILDREN IN FRANCE

WITHIN a walk of industrial Boulogne is the little village without hotels or a "season," left altogether to the fisher families.

The propriety of the little boy of these fishermen is so great that when he bathes—on Sundays—having no gear for that occasion, he does not enter the sea unless encumbered by an apron of his mother's, secured round his neck. Nor does he set his feet into the first shallow ripple until he shall have crossed himself with the sea-water. In his own bays, apart, on his own sands untrodden by strangers and out of view, should you follow this coast of Boulogne towards the south, you may surprise him fulfilling thus his modest rites.

Nothing was ever more uncentralized than the fishing village of the Pas de Calais.

Except

Except that Paris eats its fish, and that therefore from Paris must filter down a little narrow gain—how narrow when it reaches the hand that set the sail and drew the net, one must gather from the poverty of these clambering streets—the village is separate, and there is no cord of communication. Does music, for example, travel these few miles, this longer distance made by the bad roads, the smell of fish, and the incommunicable poverty? The boys here do not sing the tunes that run in cities. Does the Press cross the boundaries that close that village to the world? A woman, trim and talkative, walks over from Boulogne in the morning with so few newspapers that if the vigour of her race should fail her for once, and she should take the little *diligence*, her profits would be gone at a blow. There is indeed that barrier to literature—a dialect that has to be reckoned with. That dialect is mixed with old and alienated English; surely not because of the small intercourse with our sailors when the

fishermen go to Boulogne, but perhaps by reason of old colonizing of a coast which, in our aggressive days, we not only conquered but inhabited. Those colonists were, it is true, so dealt with by the plague that not many of them remained to improve the height and diminish the pelvic breadth of these French people ; but language is of more subtle penetration than the influences that command the body ; it prevails and clings, persists, outlives, and wears the local accent rather than die.

The way from Boulogne lies through the quarter devoted to the factories—the *usines* that call the regiment of very young girls, marching in rows, companies of friends ten strong, linked by the arm, daily to thirteen hours' labour. The streets of this industrial quarter of Boulogne are old, well-built, high-roofed, shuttered, full of character ; but the factory-smoke hangs about them, and between this road and that lie those damaged lands, neither free nor captive, subject to

accidents of country and borough, that have everywhere been laid out by the hand that broke down the walls of cities. And then, as you climb the hill, and turn from the factory to the road leading stumblingly to the fishing-village, you are compelled to know that the refuse of a fishing-village is fish.

Everywhere is woman—thick-set woman, warmly clad and with well-drawn-up stockings—evident and active out of doors. But on Sunday only is the fisherwoman to be seen with her baby out in the sea-air. Where, one wonders, does the baby abide all the week by day (he has a clean little home by night with a religious picture over his neat bed) whilst his mother is bent under the burdens, or striding on the errands, or pushing the carts, or hauling the ropes, of the labour of the little port? She is too much and too continually bent, strained, and striving. She is cloudily, though not stormily, grave, so that after one has seen her for six days earning so violently her bare bread, it

is almost a surprise to find her long-captive and long-diverted smile set free on Sunday for her child. She suns him, sitting on a stone in front of her own momentous and perpetual sea ; and after this brief play he disappears again from the light of sea and sun. The older children have their reunited Sunday also. You may find on the grassy cliff two families and one pack of cards ; two fathers, two mothers, and all the children at a game.

VIII. INTERNATIONAL

SOME years ago a Paris paper opened a fund for the supply of the diphtheria antitoxin. Public subscriptions are not so popular in France as they are here, but this prospered. To its success went much of the national love of children. Many of the subscribers sent their alms in memory of children lost, and took an obscure pleasure in making their grief half-public. They would not put into print the intimate name of the child they

had

had lost, but neither could they keep it altogether to themselves. Thus they gave the initials. And when their offering was made in the name of the *bébé attendu* they gave their own initials. They satisfied one hardly knows what desire to proclaim, a desire that has no care whom the proclamation may reach, or how vaguely. Poor Grief! Francis Thompson says she is not beautiful; she is unfortunately often silly. It is by some such instinct that certain women are moved to tell one another their affairs without much reference to the act of listening, as in Mr. Pett Ridge's stories. *Le besoin de parler de soi*, even though restrained within the limits of initials, betrays women into confidences without a confidant.

Yes, the French love their children, and by some good luck in their tenderness they have not vulgarized them by bad art. Mediocrity and bad art have been, and are, as widespread in France as in England. What else, indeed, should mediocrity be but widespread,

anywhere? But it has never made a topic of the children. There are annually pictures of a First Communion at the Salon, but they are among the better in a mixed company. ❧ As to the United States, it is surely time that we heard something newer and truer about American children than popular fiction has told us. The tourist, especially the French tourist, is entirely occupied with the women. One might gather, from the letters written by M. Bourget, for example, that there are few men in America, and that there are no children to speak of. Mr. Henry James gave us the boy in "Daisy Miller," and there was the little girl with long legs who used to go into Dickens's apartment at an hotel and look at him. But there are no children in the later little books, the village stories we have all liked so much. A baby may be introduced for the sake of grown-up emotions—generally those of one of the spinsters so common in this little fiction; but of the child for child's sake there is nothing.

Now what I saw of American children was quite different from what is thought to be true of them by English people at home. They were very, and very unexpectedly, childlike; there seemed to be some resolve to keep them so in their language; a child was not to say that the faces in a picture were "sad," but only that they "looked sorry." The children, however, were one and all trained to be sweetly courteous; it was not held that roughness was childlike. They had lovely considerate ways, and were readily affectionate.

Their fault, if it is a fault, was indeed that they were warmly inclined to an eager and easy love of strangers. This, however, is so frequent in charming children that any mother who is habitually prepared for the sentiment of a heartache may find all the heartache she expects, when a child runs to the stranger with the words of love over which she herself is apt to brood fondly every time that they come her way. Never-

theless this welcome to strangers is a fresh and generous thing in children, and in those who are not children. There is an impulse, at once natural and civilized, to meet new faces with a new greeting.

And in America are the little negro and negroid boys and girls with their sharp eyes and tiny upright braids of hair, and their extraordinary democracy and self-possession; a something more than equality where you foolishly looked for some deference from the negro and some further deference from the child of eight years old. They learn their free composure from their frank fathers. One of that friendly race was a conductor in a train. As we crossed another train on the prairie, he was waving delighted hands, and trying to make his shout heard in the uproar. And then he turned a beaming face to two English stranger ladies with whom he had exchanged no previous word. "That," he said, "was my brother-in-law."

IX. INJUSTICE

CHILDREN have a fastidiousness that time is slow to cure. It is to be wondered, for example, whether if the elderly were half as hungry as children are they would yet find so many things at table to be detestable. It is this childish dislike of many foods and drinks that makes the once general rule of thwarting the tastes of children somewhat cruel and more than a little unsalutary. For the omnivorous parent some discipline of this kind might not be amiss; but for a critical and discriminating child it was tyranny. Charles Dickens, to whom four or five generations of children have owed a quite incalculable debt, shows us Pip at the breakfast-table of Mr. Pumblechook. Dickens remembered, or imagined perfectly, the thoughts hidden in a child's heart at the sight of the meal of an elderly *gourmand*, who asks questions in arithmetic between his mouthfuls while the child, on a very ascetic diet, has to guess the answers.

Dickens was so dramatic that he could not see the sombre children of discipline observing while the grown-up people ate, without thinking their thoughts; he comes to the rescue of the desperate insufficiency of their own expression.

Not only once, or twice, does he make their stature, their protest and their lowering little vigilance his own. He knew what the deprived child thought of him and of the other guests, and he was the only guest who cared. That no one else seemed to have any sensitiveness as to the daily incident of those times says much for the robust unconsciousness of the old, and is really wonderful. How was it that people who cared at all for any opinion should care nothing for the opinion of children because it was disguised in the manners they were compelled to wear? Burns cared somewhat for the ill-opinion of a field-mouse.

What an insensibility, too, to the after-judgments, to the memories put away for

the

the future! Ruskin has a certain unavowed pride in his early hardships, seems to admire his mother for depriving him of toys, and for making him peel the walnuts (of which he might never eat) for his father's portly guests. Well, as to health, walnuts for the elderly who had just dined must needs be worse than walnuts for the child who had dined long before. But if Ruskin, remaining, in his greatness, so much the boy of his mother, the son of his father, even the child of his nurse, in his lifelong duty to them, respected their administration, there is another author who some years ago delighted to write of himself chiefly owing to rancour against his aunts, long dead. Mr. Hare was a child of that unjust time. Many scores of later wrongs must have been, we must hope, forgiven by him during all the years in which he remembered the oppressors of his early years. That he was really oppressed he has left us no room to doubt; his uncles and aunts have not been

permitted to rest in the world's oblivion—he has made a close record of their tyrannies. But he does not seize the heart of the matter as Dickens seizes it, reading in the urchin hearts of the children of his friends. Neither Victor Hugo nor George Eliot has written quite like Dickens, from within the boundaries of a child's nature, from a child's stage of progress, and without the preoccupation and attitude of older experience.

℣ That children have to be taught self-denial is a truth that the self-indulgent youth, middle-age, and old-age now alive, and having children in charge, would blush to publish. Example is a good way to teach them. Our immediate forefathers did not teach that way, if we may judge from these records. They seem to have taught that self-denial was good for the innocent but not for the more or less guilty. Let us suppose then that they reasoned in this comfortable way: "Children have a keen pleasure in life—among other things a perpetual appetite."

℣ Here

Here is the injustice, for children have a thousand distastes; things are tedious to them. We have no right to attribute to them a belief in fairies or an unwearied delight in bread and milk, things which are alien to their simple hearts. We have now learnt that the children should have many and various pleasures; and we shall perhaps give them their own when we no longer grasp so many kinds of delights for ourselves, and when we thus gradually reverse the older order and correct the newer.

℟ If the French share their days and their dinners—perhaps their too abundant dinners too abundantly—with their children more than we do even yet, they have this in their favour—that no French Mr. Hare has so dealt with his aunts, or has had so much unsalutary trouble, brought about with infinite pains and deliberation, to outgrow and outlive as a memory the better things of life.

℟ St. Monica did not impose all the fasting

on the little St. Augustine. She took her share, and more.

X. NEAR THE GROUND

WE lose, by mere growing, something of the good habit of familiarity with the old and fresh earth—the familiarity, especially, of the eyes and hands—that is the child's amends for his neglect of the sky. We hold our heads up—or we should do so—and lift our eyes to the horizon, and upwards from it, and to the tops of steeples and towers; but a child hardly looks up at all, or no higher than his father's face. It seems that many a grazing and labouring animal feeds through its last long day and draws its last load without having ever looked aloft. Some kinds lift their heads a little when they utter calls or cries, but those are moments of preoccupation, and their attention is not in their eyes.

The eyes of a child, if not so long and so unconsciously bent away as the animals'

from

from the sources of light and darkness and of the rains, are still so little interested in the heights as to need the rising of a bird to show them the way cloudward. The bird leaves a branch shaken, and the hurry of the leaves makes a child look, and, before he is aware that his eyes have taken flight, they are captured by the lark into that unwonted liberty, and beguiled into the manumission of blue sky. The child's sight hardly rises but as an arrow following the bird.

Otherwise the little gaze of those untravelled eyes is busy at close quarters with their own matters. It is not in vain that the senses of children in their simplicity are familiar with delicate shows and scents. While we walk, breathing at the levels of lilac-trees and hawthorn, they have to breathe the fresh and strange odour of moss in the woods. Nor is there a breath of the breathing undergrowth that does not find its way to the spirit of a child, to create memories there. Either those wild and most homely scents

that are close to the ground have in themselves more significance than have all the richer sweets that blossom breast-high, or else it is their direct communication with childhood that makes them magical. A child without a sense of the earth would miss as much as a child—if one could be—without a sense of the past.

Children poring over the ground make friends of a thousand little creatures that the elders have long ago forgotten. The child knows the spiritual-rustic scent of small daisies, though probably a great number of grown-up people have not been for many consecutive springs at the trouble of smelling a quite small wild daisy; one poet has had so short a memory as to call the daisies "smell-less"; and so with other kinds of growth. There are ways of the clinging of ivy, many-footed, to be known only on the terms of childhood, and so with the little animals that find their way in the green twilight of blades of grass. Their fortunes

are

are watched by children, who are so near them, and who would—if they might but know something of the work in hand—think themselves happy to use their superior strength and larger outlook in helping the industries of little ants and beetles. This may never be; the errands of the hurry of insects are not to be shared. And even in his consciousness of greater size and all other human conditions, the child is aware of his own one disproportionate disadvantage—he knows well that the ants and beetles are grown up. Only in the business of feeding he finds that he can come to an understanding with all kinds, or nearly all kinds, of small animals, and be useful.

He finds a city of ants most pleasantly responsive; there are no mistakes or misapprehensions. Dear were the ants in a wide stone *loggia* long ago, where they came up through the cracks to take their crumbs in the sunshine, until Benedetta swept them with a besom of destruction, and said in

reply to the weeping (and, too probably, the fists) of the children that the ants were not Christians. The little ants—the little grown-up ants, who had something of our respect for aunts, and among whom we perceived differences of size and of manners, were involved in indiscriminate slaughter, like soldiers.

℣ It is at close quarters, near the ground of gardens and fields, that children learn to know the countries, the counties, the north, the south, the orient, and the occident. The country that children pore over is surely the country of memories for which men afterwards die. For this, rather than for any distant plains, or valleys, or even mountains (for which armies have been said to be most willing to take the field). The country that sent the breath and spirit of its earth into the little nostrils of children, that was known in tiny detail, that was known in that low region of the earthy air through which the elders pass with their covered feet—this has always been *patria*.

It is a loss never to have lived young in countries so warm that a child is allowed to feel the grass there with naked feet. For the feet also ought to have communication with the fields; they have their own sensation of flowers. Even as all the senses are distinct and different, and as it were a separate conception of the mind, so also are the sensibilities. They are not merely added ways of communion, they are all unique ways. To lack the sensibility of feet that might have been acquainted with various Nature, but that had their tenderness touched by nothing save dead sand at the seaside, is a little loss that one wishes the civilized child had not to undergo.

XI. DAILY TIME

I HAVE asked a man who evidently enjoyed his mature years what was his principal remembrance of childhood, and he has answered, without stopping to find something unexpected—as the man of the

moment is too apt to stop—"I was bored." Too much time is what wearies childhood. Although we are all surprised by the speed with which, in after years, "time flies," as we all say, not many of us understand that there is no flying nor creeping on the part of Time; that his pace is merely relative, and that he seems to fly now because in childhood he went on a halting foot; or rather because he too was small and went a little way at his great pace. But there is no other manner of measuring the passage of time than such an act of comparison, and those who do not make it consciously must make it unconsciously. The childish measure of time, moreover, it is that makes ancient history ancient. If we heard for the first time, at forty, of Cheops, of Abraham, of the Argonautic Expedition, of Romulus, of Charlemagne, their respective antiquity in our imagination would be wonderfully lessened. Not childhood only but infancy itself—infancy sung to sleep—conceives

great mysteries of time. But measure the centuries by the ten-years' measuring rod of later life, and see what little things they are, and to what small purpose even four or five of them are added together. Our race's sense of time, and sense of history, and sense of mystery is formed of the impressions of its successive childhoods.

To return to the contemporary but differing times of ourselves and our children: they are not, as we are, accustomed to life, but more influential still is our habit of memory and their practice of oblivion. They do not make a custom of remembering; and a morning not thought upon becomes a distant thing in the afternoon; last year, not voluntarily thought upon, grows dim; whereas ripe age pauses to remember, and old age does more than pause. "There is always retrospect," said an old paper-seller to me one day; he had stood at the same corner for fifteen short though weary years.

Children, then, find the time long. Wordsworth, who so freshly, so observantly, remembered childhood, and whose childhood was so influential in our literature, characteristically remembered the length of childish time as a length of happiness—the length of a lovely day in the summer-country; it had the length of twenty days of summer-country in older age—albeit older age that in him loved the summer as passionately as, in him, childhood had loved it, older age that reluctantly saw it fly, and whispered a "Stay—thou art so fair," to a thousand thousand moments. They would not stay, though they seemed to have lingered at long-drawn play over the head of the boy he remembered. But other men, who are not Wordsworths, or anything like Wordsworths, have connected the slow time of childhood with other things than summer loveliness and light. "I was bored," said the cheerful and active man of middle-age; and we may have to deal, in the persons of

our younglings, with the childhood of persons who are not Wordsworths—hard as this saying may be in the parent's ear.

We should not let our children be bored; they may, they must, be weary of their education; but that is a different thing. It is an occupied fatigue, an active distaste. What is to be avoided is *ennui* and the vacant hours. Our fathers guarded them against this austerely, by means of duty and occupation, whether a child's duty or a schoolboy's; we—lessons apart—are attempting that guard by means of amusement—whether a child's "fun" or a schoolboy's. Now, it is with no sour discountenance that we may question this amusement. The world has tardily decided that if anyone ought to be happy it is a child, the sinless one; the decision is made with a side-glance at the more completely sinless animal, and a wish that this creature too might have the justice of happiness. And this is a modern resolution, and a modern wistfulness; it does not

imply, as it would seem to imply, a "conviction of sin" in the adult heart; it is therefore not solemn, but it is very kind and just. Not in condemnation of that temper of mind is the inevitable warning to be urged. No, the evil to be feared is not that of making the child too happy; it is that of using up the capital estate of pleasure. If a child is to continue happy, to continue amused and gay, he must be entertained upon the usufruct and not upon the capital of pleasures. Nay, even elders, considerate enough to hold that children should not have "fun" too unmixed, lest it should lose its charm, hardly know that it is the very fact of "fun" that is in danger. The child over-amused is in peril of losing amusement itself within his own heart, and not merely the pleasure in pantomime, or the pleasure in roller-skating, in other words the need of a change of gaieties. Alas, it is gaiety itself that is at stake. The man who confessed that his chief remembrance of his childhood

was that he had been bored, had kept his gaiety unimpaired in spite of that uncheerful beginning. It would have been better for him, and more just to his innocence, if he had not been bored, but it was better for him to have been bored during the inconsiderate occupations of his elders and by their dullness, than by his own amusements. That is, better of two evils. Children should not be bored at all, or not more than is human.

Not too often, not too long, should justly be the "fun." As to its length, the variations of contemporary time should teach us that one hour of pantomime is to the average young child as long as an hour of sunny summer was to Wordsworth—that is, twenty times one hour—well, Wordsworth liked round numbers, and I hope poets will continue to like them; let us suppose he exaggerated somewhat. At any rate the amused child lives quickly through a long hour, as the bored child lives minutely

through a long hour. Assuredly what we owe them both is our judgment of their different, their childish, conditions; and a little imagination that shall take their measure into our life-accustomed hands, and with it rule the measure of cyclic, of weekly, of daily, and of hourly time.

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